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Atrocity

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exploitation. The anti-slavery movement has tried to deal with these concerns by forming partnerships with groups in other countries.

International anti-slavery organizations, like humanitarian groups generally, have multiplied over time, from a handful of organizations in the early 19th century to at least 189 of the 1041 anti-slavery groups listed by End Slavery Now (www.endslaverynow.org); the remaining 852 groups focus on slavery within their own countries, though many receive international funding. A re-definition of their activities from ameliorative to rights-oriented also parallels changes in humanitarianism generally over the past few decades.

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Atrocity

Dictionary definitions of the word “atrocity” point to acts of extreme cruelty, brutal actions typically involving violence or bodily injury, shockingly bad and ferocious deeds. Mass cruelty and acts aiming to destroy a particular group of people have arguably been a part of human behavior since ancient time. Atrocities and mass-scale ethnic enmity were also present in the medieval world, and are extensively described in religious texts, including the Bible. World history has often been propelled forward by instances of carnage, when the destruction of people on a mass scale has been sought (Kiernan 2007). However, the language of atrocity only entered the public discourse in the Enlightenment era when an intensified fascination with suffering prompted a

surge in “humanitarian” thinking and action. At the time, the modern discourse of human rights was not yet familiar, but the language of atrocity characterized discussions on violations of the human body during war and colonial violence as well as on the suffering of famines and slavery (Twomey 2012; Sliwinski 2011).

Modern politics and advanced technology intensified mass atrocities. In the 21st century, the human community has come to acknowledge, name, and seek to prevent and prosecute atrocity crimes. In humanitarian contexts, starting from the mid-20th century, atrocity—mass atrocity or mass atrocity crimes—has come to indicate political violence that violates international human rights, humanitarian laws, and conventions aiming to protect people from heinous acts of violence. Therefore, the concept of atrocity is today referred to as crimes against humanity, genocide, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing. Atrocities are seen as acts of extreme mass violence, brutal instances that shock the public conscience are condemned by the international community, and are seen to constitute a moral obligation to prevent, intervene, and to protect the victims and punish the perpetrators (Kiernan 2007; Brudholm 2018).

The contemporary legal conventions and laws on mass atrocity are products of contemporary history, responses to the bloody events of two world wars. In the aftermath of World War II, and as a response to the atrocities of the Holocaust, the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was signed (UN 1948). In the document, genocide is defined as “acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” The convention defines and condemns genocide as a mass atrocity. It was followed by the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols (ICRC 2014), which describe and condemn war crimes and seek to protect soldiers, military personnel, and civilians during wartime and occupation. The legal term “crimes against humanity” was developed during the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals (1945). Crimes against humanity are “acts that are deliberately committed as a part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian or an identifiable part of a civilian population” (ICC 1998, Article 7). The concept of ethnic cleaning—a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic group from certain geographic areas—was defined in the final report (1994) by a United Nations commission of experts looking into the violations of international humanitarian law during the wars in the former Yugoslavia (UN 1994).

In most of the Cold War cases, mass atrocity was condemned by the international community, but the prevention of atrocities was often hindered by the

norms of non-interference. The end of the Cold War, and the massacres in Rwanda and in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, prompted a renewed concern to protect human beings against mass violence (Bellamy 2012).

Although the prevention of mass atrocity is currently a major concern of international politics and humanitarianism, atrocity crimes continue to be perpetrated by state and non-state actors. Furthermore, what is recognized as an atrocity, and politically treated as such, still remains ambivalent. In addition to global power politics and political co-option, acknowledgement of atrocity is also dependent on attention, mediation, and visibility, and some incidents of mass violence garner more concern than others. Visibility and visual proof have been pivotal in the recognition and confirmation of atrocious events, as some events are seen as more atrocious than others (Sliwinski 2011). Given the dominant role of visual evidence, when there is no visual testimony, no picture of an atrocity, it becomes more difficult to recognize the occurrence and extent of atrocities (Sontag 2003).

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